

[Widow Buckingham]

W15007 1 [Conn.?] [1938-9?] The Widow Buckingham

The Widow Buckingham's kitchen door is wide open this afternoon, to admit warm spring air, and the lady herself is enjoying a moment of leisure by her radio in the living room. I am forced to rap repeatedly upon the open door in an attempt to make myself heard above the din of a military band, eventually attracting attention by an emphatic knock inserted strategically between the concluding bars of "Stars and Stripes Forever," and the station announcement. The radio clicks off, and Mrs. Buckingham, plump, gray, in the sixties, comes into the kitchen, her determined frown evidence of a particularly high order of sales resistance. When I explain the reason for my call, however, the lady relaxes perceptibly and invites me to be seated.

"Don't know's I can give you much history about these [Reynolds?] Bridge Companies," she says. "We only lived here since 1916. I came from a knifemakin' family, though. Worked at it for twenty six years myself, over in Hotchkissville. American Shear and Knife Company—that burnt down in 1914, and they never rebuilt it.

"My father was from Sheffield, England, where all the good knifemakers come from. I was six years old when we moved to Hotchkissville. Of course I don't remember much about the old country, but I can remember my mother tellin' about how when she first come over here she was scared of everything. Sheffield was a big city, you know, and they weren't used to country ways. She was afraid of the peep frogs, when first she heard 'em. My sister and my two brothers was born in Hotchkissville. My sister—she lives down here on the flat now—father used to say, 'she's the first bloody Yankee in our family, and she's a bugger.'

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"Women in the knife shops? Oh, yes, there was about ten of 'em over in Hotchkissville. We used to clean, and pack the knives, little jobs like that. They had boys to get the work ready for the finishers. Most all English people, I don't know what it was, whether the Yanks couldn't learn the trade, or what. Oh, there 2 was some, of course. The men that owned the companies used to go to Sheffield to hire help, pay their passage to this country, and let 'em work it out.

"When I got married—I know it don't sound like much, but they were wonderful knives—they gave me a set of the finest kitchen cutlery. They don't make knives any more, they really don't.

"The girls didn't get much money. Paid by the month. Some of them get about twenty five cents a day. I remember the first month I worked I made eight dollars and fifteen cents. I gave it to my mother and she gave me a quarter to buy candy with and I had to make it last until the next payday, too. You could get more with a quarter then, though. You could get as much candy for a quarter as you get for a dollar today.

"Father was a cutler. That was the best job there was. And he was a fine workman, too. When he died he was working on a knife an inch long. It had fourteen different articles in it, and you could carry it in a snuff box. My brother Willie always said he was going to finish it, but I told him, "Willie, you'll never be the knifemaker father was.' And he wasn't either. My nephew Joe down in Bridgeport has got that knife now, but I don't think he ever finished it either.

"Willie worked at grindin', and it give him consumption in the end. He never cared anything about the work, always rather play ball or something. Old Mr. Coles came to father one day and he siad, 'I'm goin' to make a knifemaker out of Willie.' Father said, 'take the bloody bugger and see what you can do with him, I can't seem to teach him the trade.' So Mr. Coles showed him the grindin'. Willie never liked it but he stuck to it. He came to work at the Thomaston Knife shop afterwards.

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"A big strappin' chap, Willie was. Six feet one, and as husky. You'd never think there was anything wrong with him. I remember the day he knew what was wrong with him. He'd been out choppin' wood and he come in and told me he'd spit up some blood. I told him it was probably somethin' caught inside his throat that had cut 3 him a little, a crust of bread or the like. Finally we got the doctor and he thumped him and sounded him. He says, 'One lung is kind of bad, but the other one's sound as a dollar.' After he'd gone Willie says 'He's a goddamn liar, they're both gone and I know it.'

"Well, he had a horror of sanitariums. But finally the doctor persuaded him he'd be better off and he consented to go. Went down to Shelton. He stayed there fourteen days, and when I went to see him he was so homesick he cried to come back with me. I hadn't the heart to refuse him so I brought him home. Fixed up a room upstairs, screened it all in and all, and tried to give him the same care he'd get in the sanitarium, but it was hard. He says to me, 'Ada,' he says, 'You're not able to do it, it's too much for you.' I didn't say nothin', but he was right, of course. Finally one day I was goin, to the city to pay the gas bill, and he says, 'Ada, he says, 'you better put in an application for me to the state, I think I'd be better off in the sanitarium. It was a mistake to come home,' he says. That was in May. I put the application in for him, but it was August before his turn came. He went away and lived two years, but finally he died. Fifty years old when he died. You'd never think there was a thing wrong with him, right up till the last.

"It was a common thing with grinders. There was a young fella named Paddy, used to board with me years ago, he got it too. Only twenty four years old, he was. He had an application in for Wallingford, but they wouldn't take him in over there, he was that bad. They only take the mild cases. I remember the day he got the letter, turnin' him down. I says, is it good news or bad? He says, bad, very bad. Had the doctor and the doctor took me to one side and says 'mr. B. this boy won't live a month. He shouldn't be here. It will be hard on you.' I says, 'doctor, that boy hasn't got kith or kin in the world and no place to go,

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and here he'll stay as long as I'm able to do anything for him.' Four weeks later to the day, he died.

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"Well, it's history you're after, ain't it? I've got something here may interest you." Mrs. Buckingham leaves the room, returns after a protracted absence, with a yard long roll of paper, which she spreads upon the kitchen table. "Pictures," she says, "of every knife company in the country. Just think of the hundreds and hundreds of people who worked in those places, and now most every one of them is out of business."

These were the "American Pocket Knife Manufacturers of 1811" according to the inscription on the bottom of the sheet," compiled by Walter C. Lindemann, Walden, N.Y."

"Take em down" urges Mrs. Buckingham, "that's history. Think of the hundreds and hundreds of people that used to work in those shops." A complete list follows:

Schatt and Morgan Knife Co., Titusville, Pa.; W.R. Case & Sons, Bradford, Pa.; The Cutlery Works, Smethpart, Pa.; Union Cutlery Co., Tidouta, Pa.; Case Cutlery Co., Kane, Pa.; A. F. Bannister Co., Newark, N.J.; Valley Forge Cutlery Co., Newark, N.J.; Booth Brothers, Sussex, N.J.; Keyport Cutlery Co., Keyport, N.J.; Ulster Knife Works, Ellensville, N.J.; Naponach Knife Co., Naponach, N.Y., Cattaraugus Cutlery Co., Montour Falls, N.Y.

[Robeson?] Cutlery Co., Perry, N.Y., Union Knife Co., Union, N.Y.; Warwick Knife Co., Warwick, N.Y.; Utica Cutlery Co., Utica, N.Y.; Northfield Knife Co., Northfield, Conn.; American Shear and Knife Co., Hotchkissville, Conn.; Empire Knife Co., Winsted, Conn.; Challenge Cutlery Co., Bridgeport, Conn.; Miller Brothers, Meriden, Conn.; Southington Cutlery Co., Southington, Conn.; Old American Knife Co., Reynolds Bridge, Conn.; Waterville Cutlery Co., Waterville, Conn.; Thomaston Knife Co., Reynolds Bridge, Conn.; Humason and Bickley, New Britain, Conn.; John Russell Knife Co., Turners Falls, Mass.;

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Burkinshaw Pepperell Co., Mass.; Novelty Co., Canton, Ohio; Canton Cutlery Co., Canton, Ohio; Morris Cutlery Co., Morris, Ill.; Crandall Cutlery Co., Bradford, Pa.

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“That's all the history I can give you,” says Mrs. Buckingham. “Don't know where you'll get any more of it around here either. No knifemakers left except Old Man Dunbar. All gone. The Bensons and the Buxtons and them. All moved away.”